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ABSTRACT

This paper discusses the question of the legitimacy of applying structural analysis to actual human behavior and illustrates its legitimacy by using the reasoning in an essay by Paul Ricoeur. It then asks if the principles of communication development (obliqueness, exchange, and dying) derived from Helen Keller's experience of communication learning can hold for a contemporary college student's experience of communication learning. After analyzing and discussing the case study of a college student, the paper concludes that a major technique of structural analysis is just as legitimately applied to actual human behavior as it is to texts and contributes to understanding how people learn to communicate.

(TJ)

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**STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF
COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT**

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STRUCTURAL ANALYSIS OF COMMUNICATION DEVELOPMENT

Communication development has been an important issue in speech communication for some time now.¹ Not only is it an intradisciplinary theoretical and pedagogical concern, but communication skills and understandings are basic to surviving in our rapidly changing, high-technology culture.²

In a previous essay I proposed three principles that describe "how people change communicatively."³ In what follows I want (a) to raise two questions about those principles and (b) to argue that answers to these questions contribute to our "understandings of how people learn to communicate."⁴

Those three principles of communication development referred to above were derived from a structural analysis of Helen Keller's childhood experience of suddenly grasping the concept of language. The first question I want to raise is one of method: "How legitimate is it to apply structural analysis to actual human behavior?" The Helen Keller analysis was, after all, the analysis of a text, a chapter from her autobiography. And that seems to have been the original intent of Levi-Strauss in myth analysis.⁵

My position is that it is entirely legitimate to turn Levi-Strauss's techniques for myth analysis to the analysis of human action. To support that position, I rely on a provocative essay by Paul Ricoeur.⁶ Ricoeur's position is that if human behavior is enough like literary texts (and he argues cogently that it is), then the same interpretive procedures may be used to understand human behavior in general as are used to understand literary texts. He begins his argument by asserting that discourses⁷ are marked by four traits.⁸ First, they occur in time and therefore enunciate a temporally idiosyncratic complex of meanings. Second, they have a speaker/writer

and in various ways refer to him or her. Third, discourses are always about something; and fourth, they are addressed to some kind of audience.

The next point in Ricoeur's argument is a basic distinction between spoken and written discourses.⁹ Spoken discourse is ephemeral and fleeting, but to write discourse is to fix it in time, to hold it for further examination. The four traits of discourse therefore manifest themselves quite differently in spoken and written discourse. Relative to spoken discourse: (1) written discourse is freed from the ostensive reference of the moment; (2) the author's intended meanings are much less important in written discourse; (3) in written discourse, the "something" that the discourse is about is potentially much larger than the shared situation of communicants in spoken discourse; and (4) in written discourse, the addressees are all who can read. Written discourse, in short, permits a radical separation of those four traits of discourse, whereas in spoken discourse they tend to co-occur in time and space.

This kind of separation is what Ricoeur means by the objectification that is necessary for human behavior to be an object of science.

My claim is that action itself, action as meaningful, may become an object of science, without losing its character of meaningfulness, through a kind of objectification similar to the fixation which occurs in writing. By this objectification, action is no longer a transaction to which the discourse of action would still belong. It constitutes a delineated pattern which has to be interpreted according to its inner connections.¹⁰

That "delineated pattern" of action is what is made manifest through structural analysis, which we shall consider shortly.

The final point in Ricoeur's argument is that human behavior shares

with written discourse the radical separation of those four defining traits.¹¹ Let us see how each trait applies to human behavior. In each case, the guiding assumption is that doing is a kind of utterance.

First, written discourse is said to be fixed in time. So it is with human action: (1) I am perceived as making statements by my actions; (2) I enact the constitutive rules of my culture; and (3) my actions have lasting effects, as, for example, a parent may influence his or her children. In each case, it is possible to consider the meaning of the action detached from the event of the action. Second, written discourse refers to a speaker, no matter how "distended and complicated" that relationship may be. Likewise with human action: There may be a "distended and complicated" relationship between the doer and the action. Action has a social dimension. Indeed, we often cannot foresee or control the unintended effects of our actions. And those effects often become the property of society if they are institutionalized as reputation or as policy. Third, written discourse is always about something. And that something is that "world" the discourse calls forth from the reader. In like manner, "the meaning of an important event exceeds, overcomes, transcends, the social conditions of its production."¹² Fourth, written discourse always has an addressee who interprets it. As with texts, my actions are "read," or interpreted, by observers. "That means that, like a text, human action is an open work, the meaning of which is 'in suspense'."¹³

Therefore, Ricoeur argues, since doing is a kind of utterance, the same interpretive procedures that are used to understand texts may also be used to understand human behavior. For interpretive procedure he has in mind structural analysis.¹⁴ The best way to describe what I mean by structural analysis is to present an example. Below is Claude Levi Strauss's

study of the Oedipus myth.¹⁵ In this example, Levi-Strauss has partitioned

Figure 1

the Oedipus story into its major episodes. Then he has placed similar episodes, or episodes that share a common feature, into the same column. The rows-and-columns arrangement, if read top to bottom and left to right, preserves the sequence of episodes while presenting a typology of episodes in the columns.

By analogy each column is like a phoneme and each event in the column is like an allophone. Levi-Strauss explains the general significance of the columns:

Were we to tell the myth, we would disregard the columns and read the rows from left to right and from top to bottom. But if we want to understand the myth, then we will have to disregard one half of the diachronic dimension (top to bottom) and read from left to right, column after column, each one being considered as a unit.¹⁶

Ricoeur refers to the telling of the myth as explicating its surface semantics whereas the understanding of the myth (i.e., understanding the "meanings" of the columns) yields a depth semantics.¹⁷ The latter is the goal of structural analysis, according to Roland Barthes, "to reconstruct an 'object' in such a way as to manifest thereby the rules of functioning . . . of this object."¹⁸ What one has as a result of structural analysis "is therefore actually a simulacrum of the object, but a directed, interested simulacrum, since the imitated object makes something appear which remained invisible, or, if one prefers, unintelligible in the natural object."¹⁹

The guiding question to this point has been: "How legitimate is it to apply structural analysis to actual human behavior?" Given Ricoeur's reasoning, it seems entirely legitimate.

The second question I want to raise with regard to those three principles of communication development is focused on the principles themselves rather than on their method of derivation. If the principles of Obliqueness, Exchange, and Dying characterized Helen Keller's experience of communication learning, to what extent do those same principles hold for a contemporary college student's experience of communication learning? The case study I will present below is representative of dozens I have collected from students over the last four years, and for that reason it is archetypal with nearly the same force as Helen Keller's experience.

The source of the present case is a classroom assignment I have used in varying versions over the last four years. It is intended to introduce students to a developmental perspective on interpersonal communication by having them analyze a concrete experience of their own that resulted in communication learning.

Here are the basic elements of the assignment: (1) Recount a significant learning experience from your past;²⁰ (2) make a chronology of the most important episodes or events in the experience; (3) make a column parallel to this list and name the emotions or feelings you experienced with each event listed; (4) arrange the chronology into a rows-and-columns grid in Levi-Strauss fashion; and (5) interpret the grid with reference to the question, "How (not what) did I learn in this experience?"

Here is the case.²¹ Coming to college or university precipitates many personal changes in students. A not infrequent one is the termination of an amorous relationship that started in high school. Such was the

experience of Diane F. When she came to the university she had been dating John B exclusively for her last two and one half years in high school. As she recounted this significant learning experience, Diane pointed out three problems with their relationship--John was nearly four years her senior, they had not been together all that much since he had been away at school (the last two years), and, what turned out to be the biggest problem of all, John was serious about marriage, and Diane did not realize how serious.

They had discussed marriage before, but it was always focused on the distant future when they were both out of school. It was like an exciting fantasy to Diane at this point. Then, in December of her freshman year, John's best friend, also a junior, got married. John immediately began reassessing his finances and decided that he and Diane could be married the following September. This frightened Diane. She simply did not want to be married so soon. But for fear of losing John she did not tell him how she felt.

Two months passed with John making arrangements for the wedding and for setting up housekeeping and with Diane frustrated and losing sleep and remaining silent in the face of her impending doom. Another month passed, and she was finally able to break her silence on the subject. She told him she would not marry him the next September, but he would not accept it. The next two months saw John alternating between threatening suicide and begging Diane to change her mind. Needless to say, that brought on more frustration, lost sleep, and even lost weight.

In what turned out to be their last conversation, Diane was able to tell John how she had felt all along about marriage, that she had been too immature to consider marriage seriously so soon, and that she wished he would forgive her and be her friend. In Diane's own words, "He couldn't,

and I haven't seen him since."

Recounting a significant learning experience is the first step in the discovery procedure. Step 2 is to make a chronology of the important episodes in the experience, and Step 3 is to make a parallel list of emotions that accompanied those events. Figure 2 presents the lists as Diane produced them.

Figure 2

There is a minor problem that some entries in the list of emotions do not seem to name emotions. However, this was remedied when she arranged the sequence of emotions into a rows-and-columns grid. That is the fourth step in the procedure. Figure 3 reproduces Diane's grid. Recall from the

Figure 3

explanation of Levi-Strauss's analysis of the Oedipus myth in Figure 1 that each column represents a class of events or shares a common feature. Diane F provided the column labels herself:

The final step in implementing the discovery procedure is to interpret the grid. Diane made the following interpretations. Recall that these interpretations are answers to the question (from the student's point of view), "How did I learn in this experience?" First, "I had to 'bounce' back and forth between being totally withdrawn from the situation and my dissatisfaction with the condition of my life." Second, she had to understand her share of the responsibility for her problem. Third, she had to become intensely dissatisfied before she decided to take initiatives to deal with her

situation. Fourth, the learning process was "long and difficult." Fifth, it was helpful to have the observations of a friend relatively outside the problem. Sixth, once she found a way to deal with the situation, she stuck with it.

Now, return to the theoretical question at hand: To what extent do the principles of Obliqueness, Exchange, and Dying hold for the communication learning experience of a contemporary college student? First, consider the Principle of Obliqueness. The principle refers to the notion that or as a result of formal educational experiences "whether as a result of incidental life experiences, no one or no thing can teach me how to communicate--directly, that is."²² Turning to the case study, it is plain that Diane F's primary concern throughout the experience was the state of her relationship with John. It was only afterward, when she was asked to reflect systematically on such an experience, that she saw the events as contributing to her communication development. Her own interpretation of the events indicates that she had learned quite a bit about the role of her communication in the development of her relationship with John, but that the learning apparently had not been in the forefront of her consciousness at the time. A useful analogy is the child's learning of grammar. The focus of children's language is typically on the content of speech, but children nonetheless learn those syntactic structures without directly focusing on them. The Principle of Obliqueness, then, is useful in understanding the case of Diane F.

The second principle of communication development derived from the Helen Keller analysis was the Principle of Exchange. The principle of exchange refers to the notion that "experience, whether incidental or formal-educational, that leaves me unscathed, unruffled, safe and secure" has not been a learning experience.²³ In other words, the good things that come to

me in experience are not free; it costs for me to move toward greater insight with regard to my communication. I must pass through a region of disintegration and alienation.

Turning to the case of Diane F, it is equally plain to see the Principle of Exchange at work. What she gained in maturity and responsibility she paid for in frustration, fear, worry, loss of sleep, and loss of appetite. It is as if she had gone to the mountains on holiday. The days of relaxation and escape cost gasoline or perhaps a plane ticket; they cost the hassle of a flat tire or an overbooking; they cost time and effort. Except that Diane F had not planned a vacation (the payoff: what she got for the effort). It was only when she got "there" that she realized where she had been, what she had paid, and what she had gotten in return. The trade-off was serendipitous but no less real or important. The Principle of Exchange is also useful in understanding the experience of Diane F.

The third principle of communication development derived from the Helen Keller analysis was the Principle of Dying. The Principle of Dying refers to the notion that "In order to move to a new level of understanding I must leave the security and familiarity of my present level of understanding. My old identity dies as a new identity is born."²⁴

Turning to the case of Diane F, it is plain that the Diane at the beginning of her relationship with John B was a very different person from the Diane at the end of the relationship. The early Diane was passive, naive, and irresponsible; the later Diane was active, aware, and responsible. Her old identity had surely died, and a new one had developed in its place. The Principle of Dying is also useful in understanding the experience of Diane F.

After reviewing the three principles of communication development derived from the Helen Keller analysis, the answer to the second question seems

clear. The Principles of Obliqueness, Exchange, and Dying are useful in understanding the communication development of a contemporary college student.

In this essay, I argued that a major technique of structural analysis is just as legitimately applied to actual human behavior as it is to texts. I referred specifically to three principles of communication development derived by that technique of structural analysis: the Principles of Obliqueness, Exchange, and Dying. And I showed that those three principles are not limited in their application to discursive or textual experiences (e.g., Helen Keller's grasp of language); they are useful also in understanding the experience of communication development of a contemporary college student. Structural analysis, the evidence seems to indicate, contributes to the satisfaction of that still-appropriate recommendation Sam Becker made over fifteen years ago. It contributes to our "understandings of how people learn to communicate."²⁵

<u>Overrating of Blood Relations</u>	<u>Underrating of Blood Relations</u>	<u>Denial of the Autochthonous Origin of Man</u>	<u>Autochthonous Origin of Man</u>
1. Cadmos seeks his sister Europa, ravished by Zeus.		2. Cadmos kills the dragon.	
	3. The Spartoi kill one an- other.		4. Labdoacos (Laios' father) = <u>lame</u> (?)
	5. Oedipus kills his father, Laios.		6. Laios (Oedipus' father) = <u>left-sided</u> (?)
		7. Oedipus kills the Sphinx.	8. Oedipus = <u>swollen</u> <u>foot</u> (?)
9. Oedipus marries his mother, Jo- casta.	10. Eteocles kills his brother, Polynices.		
11. Antigone buries her brother, Polynices, despite prohibi- tion.			

FIGURE 1.

Levi-Strauss's Structural Analysis of the Oedipus Myth
(adapted from Levi-Strauss, 1963, pp. 214-15)

<u>Episodes</u>	<u>Emotions</u>
1. Entered college	Happy
2. John got serious.	Unconsciously denying
3. John's friend's marriage	Forced admission
4. John plans wedding.	Passive and confused
5. I realized I didn't want to get married.	Unhappy
6. John sent me roses.	Deeply confused
7. I got physically ill	Realized that I had to become more active
8. I told John that I didn't want to get married.	Unhappy
9. John threatened suicide.	Reverted to passiveness
10. John arguing and begging	Deeply depressed
11. My friend's question, "How could you have prevented this?"	Responsible and guilty
12. My reaction	Changed attitude about my passive attitude toward life
13. I told John the whole truth	Felt more mature
14. John left for good.	Feel better about my new honest self

FIGURE 2.

Diane F's Chronology of Events and Emotions During
Her Significant Learning Experience

<u>Childish</u>	<u>Disrupted</u>	<u>Withdrawn</u>	<u>Dissatisfied</u>	<u>More Mature</u>
1. HAPPY entered college				
2. UNCONSCIOUS DENIAL John got serious	3. FORCED ADMISSION John's friend's marriage	4. PASSIVE AND CONFUSED John plans wedding	5. UNHAPPY realized I didn't want to get married	
		6. DEEPLY CONFUSED John sent me roses		
	7. REALIZED I HAD TO BECOME MORE ACTIVE I got physically ill		8. UNHAPPY told John I didn't want to get married	
		9. REVERTED TO PASSIVENESS John threatened suicide	10. DEPRESSED John arguing and begging	
			11. GUILT friend's ques- tion, how could you have pre- vented this?	11. RESPONSIBLE friend's question, how could you have prevented this?
				12. CHANGED ATTITUDE my reaction to friend's question
				13. FELT MORE MATURE told John the whole truth
				14. FELT BETTER ABOUT MYSELF John left for good

FIGURE 3.

Diane F's Structural Analysis of Her Significant Learning Experience

NOTES

¹Samuel L. Becker, "Research on Speech Pedagogy, in Dimensions of Rhetorical Scholarship, ed. Roger E. Nebergall (Norman, Oklahoma: Department of Speech, University of Oklahoma, 1963); Robert Hopper and Rita C. Naremore, Children's Speech (New York: Harper and Row, 1973); New Horizons for Teacher Education in Speech Communication, eds. P. Judson Newcombe and R.R. Allen (Skokie, Illinois: National Textbook Company, N.D.); Richard L. Conville, "Change, Process, and the Future of Communication Education," Southern Speech Communication Journal, 43 (Spring 1978), 265-282; C. Jack Orr, "Communication, Relativism, and Student Development," Communication Education, 27 (March 1978), 83-98.

²Alvin Toffler, Future Shock (New York: Bantam, 1970); Philip Slater, Earth-Walk (New York: Bantam, 1974).

³Conville, "Change, Process, and the Future of Communication Education."

⁴Becker, p. 42.

⁵Structural Anthropology, trans. Claire Jacobson and Brooke G. Schoepf (New York: Basic Books, 1963), pp. 206-231.

⁶Paul Ricoeur, "The Model of the Text: Meaningful Action Considered as a Text," Social Research, 38 (Autumn 1974), 529-562.

⁷"Discourse is the counterpart of what linguists call language-systems or linguistic codes. Discourse is language-event or linguistic usage" (Ricoeur, p. 530).

⁸Ricoeur, pp. 530-537.

⁹Ricoeur, pp. 530-533.

¹⁰Ricoeur, p. 538.

¹¹Ricoeur, pp. 537-545.

¹²Ricoeur, p. 543.

¹³Ricoeur, p. 544.

¹⁴Ricoeur, pp. 559-560.

¹⁵Levi-Strauss, p. 214.

¹⁶Levi-Strauss.

¹⁷Ricoeur, p. 557. Levi-Strauss's own "depth semantics" is instructive at this point. "It follows that column four is to column three as column one is to column two. The inability to connect two kinds of relationships is overcome (or rather replaced) by the assertion that contradictory relationships are identical inasmuch as they are both self-contradictory in a similar way. Although this is still a provisional formulation of the structure of mythical thought, it is sufficient at this stage.

"Turning back to the Oedipus myth, we may now see what it means. The myth has to do with the inability, for a culture which holds the belief that mankind is autochthonous . . . to find a satisfactory transition between this theory and the knowledge that human beings are actually born from the union of man and woman. Although the problem obviously cannot be solved, the Oedipus myth provides a kind of logical tool which relates the original problem--born from one or born from two?--to the derivative problem: born from different or born from same? By a correlation of this type, the overrating of blood relations is to the underrating of blood relations as the attempt to escape autochthony is to the impossibility to succeed in it. Although experience contradicts theory, social life validates cosmology by its similarity of structure. Hence cosmology is true" (Levi-Strauss, p. 216).

¹⁸Roland Barthes, "The Structuralist Activity," in The Structuralists from Marx to Levi-Strauss, ed. Richard and Fernande De George (Garden

City, New York: Doubleday, 1972), p. 149.

¹⁹Barthes, p. 149.

²⁰By a significant learning experience is meant one that meets, for the individual, the criteria outlined by Kenneth Boulding in his explanation of the third and fourth kinds of effects messages may have on one's image. They are a revolutionary change, one that results in a person seeing the world quite differently than before, and a change in a person's degree of certainty regarding his or her image of reality. Each time students did this assignment, significant was defined for them in this manner. See Kenneth E. Boulding, The Image (Ann Arbor, Michigan: The University of Michigan Press, 1956), pp. 7-11.

²¹Pseudonyms are used throughout.

²²Conville, p. 278.

²³Conville, p. 279.

²⁴Conville.

²⁵Becker p. 42.